

# TALKING POINTS FOR MEETING OF AMERICANS FOR DEMOCRATIC ACTION

June 24, 2001

## GENERAL:

The theme for this conference is "Wake up Democrats". It couldn't be more appropriate. We all had a pretty good idea of what was in store for us if George Bush won the Presidency and kept effective control of the Congress.

But I think the reality is even worse than many people expected. We've seen an unprecedented retreat on environmental protections. We've seen a squandering of the surplus with tax cuts heavily weighted to benefit the wealthy. We've seen a sell-out on the tobacco issue. We've seen the State of California abandoned in dealing with its energy crisis.

And—in terms of what I want to particularly talk to you about today—we've seen a real disregard for the health care needs of the American people.

This Administration has shown it has no real commitment to the principle of social insurance, whether we're talking about its plans to privatize Social Security or change Medicare into a program run by—and for—private insurance companies.

It has no serious plan on the table to deal with the millions of uninsured Americans. In fact, all it offers on the subject is tax breaks designed for people who already have coverage rather than help for those who don't.

And you know what's even worse: they flat out lie about it. They take polls to see what people want, and then they use those words in the most cynical way to make people believe that is what they are for. But then they back policies that do the opposite.

## THE UNINSURED:

Let's talk first about the uninsured. It's a travesty that we've still got some 42 million people without health insurance in this country.

It's a travesty that at a time when we finally had a budget surplus to let us do something about it we've squandered it on tax breaks mostly for people who

don't need them.

First, it is inexcusable in this country that we haven't got a plan to cover everybody. The truth is we should have universal coverage. End of story. But at the very least we ought to be moving now to make sure that everybody who can't afford coverage should have it—and that should be kids, and parents, and singles alike. All of them.

But that's not on the radar screen for this Administration. What little was set aside in the budget—at the initiation of the Congress—the Administration and the Republicans don't want to spend on programs that we know can work and really provide coverage to people.

We've got the model of the Children's Health Insurance Program that we passed four years ago to get coverage to all low-income kids. States—including California—haven't reached all the kids they should, but they're trying. Even this Administration ought to see the logic of at least expanding this to reach their parents.

This Administration pays lip service to that, but they don't want to spend any money to do it! They just want to use the money we've set aside for kids and stretch it to cover their parents too. That's no solution to the problem.

## MEDICARE:

Then there's Medicare. We need to do a lot better by our seniors. They need more help from Medicare, they need help with long term care, and most of all they need prescription drugs!

It might have made sense some 36 years ago when Medicare was passed to have a program of health insurance without coverage of prescription drugs, but it doesn't make any sense any longer. All of us need drug coverage. But if you're a senior or a disabled person, it's absolutely critical to have drug coverage. They have more health conditions that require drug treatment, they use more drugs, and when they don't have coverage, they pay the very highest prices out of pocket.

Oh sure, our Republican friends pay lip service to providing prescription drugs. But you know their ideas about how to do it? The President wants to just give a block of money to the States, and hope they use it to provide drug coverage

for the poor.

That's just a cop out. It's not very likely to reach many people, and it's designed to take the pressure off adding the benefit to Medicare! This isn't just a problem for poor people. You all know that when you face big drug bills, we all need help. Certainly the people who live on their Social Security checks, people with only modest incomes and savings, need coverage too.

Then there's the other idea the Republicans have: tell people to go buy a prescription drug plan from the insurance companies. Never mind that the insurers say they won't offer it. Never mind the experience of charging people too much, picking off the good risks, and making it unaffordable if you're sick. Their idea is to give the money to the insurers instead of Medicare beneficiaries.

This is just part of their plan to turn Medicare into vouchers for private insurance. Well you know what? They're wrong. Medicare stands with Social Security as one of the finest programs we've established in this country. We need to make it better, not tear it apart.

#### PATIENTS BILL OF RIGHTS:

I just want to mention two other things. One is the patients' bill of right. We're right in the middle of the fight for that in Washington. There's a bipartisan majority in both the House and Senate for a good strong bill—mostly Democrats, but with some courageous Republicans who've fought hard for this. But the President's contribution is just to continue to say he'll veto the McCain-Kennedy-Ganske-Dingell bills that I'm proud to be a sponsor of. Those are bills that are designed to deliver on their promise, not just provide window-dressing.

You know the idea here is pretty simple. People should get the health benefits they were promised when they joined their HMO or bought insurance. They should be able to get emergency care when they need it. They should be covered in clinical trials. They should be able to hear about all their options from their physicians, and to see the specialists they need.

And they should be able to enforce their rights! Why should HMOs and big insurers be protected from being held liable for their actions? People need rights, yes. But they need the remedies to enforce those rights or they really haven't got them.

## TOBACCO:

Finally, I want to say a word about tobacco. This Administration in an action that was just shameless—there's no other word for it—is selling out to big tobacco. Their announcement this week that they wanted to settle with the tobacco companies on the Justice Department suit to recover all the money we spent in Medicare and Veterans programs to pay for health care services for people who were sick and dying because they smoked—it's inexcusable.

First they starved the effort of funds, then they said their case was weak, and then they said they'd settle. Let's see now: is there a better way to make sure you let the tobacco companies off the hook? Should we assume that campaign contributions had nothing to do with this? Or should we just conclude they have no intention of protecting the public health? Either way, it's bad.

## CONCLUSION:

So we've all got a lot of reason to say "wake up Democrats". We need to take our government back. We need to use its power to solve people's problems, not respond to big money and big business. And nowhere, nowhere, is that more obvious than it is in health care. I look forward to being part of that fight with all of you. And let's serve notice: we won't give up.